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NEWS

Sheila Rayam to lead Gannett's Mohawk Valley newsrooms



Michael Kilian

Observer-Dispatch

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Longtime Rochester journalist Sheila Rayam becomes the new newsroom leader of Gannett Co.'s Mohawk Valley operations in April.

Rayam has been chosen to serve as the executive editor of the Observer-Dispatch and of The Times Telegram, Gannett New York State Editor Michael Kilian announced Monday.

"I'm honored and excited about this new role," Rayam said. "I have the same passion for news and storytelling today that I had when I first walked into the Democrat and Chronicle in 1990. I can't wait to get to work with my colleagues in Utica."

She is the first Black executive editor of either newspaper. Previously, LaBarbara "Bobbi" Bowman had served for more than four years in the O-D newsroom's No. 2 position — managing editor — during the second half of the 1990s.

"Sheila is among our industry's leaders in spurring effective community engagement involving the entire newsroom team," Kilian said. "She knows how to hold our government leaders accountable while ensuring all voices in a community are respected and heard."

Rayam has led the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle's opinion operations over the past year. In the months leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, she guided that newspaper's "mobile newsroom" strategy connecting every newsroom staff member with members of under-served communities in Rochester.

She is an editor in the USA TODAY Network's "Justice in My Town" project launched after the May 2020 killing of George Floyd while under police restraint in Minneapolis.

Rayam leads in-person and virtual Storytellers events in Rochester and the Northeast. In addition, she is a leader and key presenter in a working group seeking to strengthen public

safety coverage at Gannett sites by making it of greater value to communities most affected by crime.

She succeeds Ron Johns, executive editor of the Utica, Herkimer and Hamilton sites between 2014 and 2020.

The Observer-Dispatch first began publishing 205 years ago in 1816 and serves the entire Mohawk Valley. Its website, www.uticaod.com, launched in 2000.

The Times Telegram serves Herkimer County. That newspaper is the result of the merger of The Little Falls Times and The Herkimer Telegram. The Times Telegram serves readers online at www.timestelegram.com.

Rayam also will oversee the Mid-York Weekly newspaper based in Hamilton.

She is a 1990 graduate of the State University of New York College at Buffalo. She joined the Rochester Times-Union, the former afternoon newspaper owned by Gannett, as a clerk in the features department.

Over the years, she has served in a variety of roles including reporter, copy editor, site manager for a women's news site called herrochester.com, entertainment editor, social media editor and most recently community engagement editor and opinion editor.

A lifelong Rochesterian, Rayam is an active member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.

"Leaving home and the D&C newsroom is bittersweet, but I cannot wait to get to know the residents of Utica and the readership of the Observer-Dispatch," Rayam said.

"I am eager to hear about the topics they believe deserve news coverage and I will be setting up many meetings to talk to community leaders, organizations and grassroots groups in the area."